

Customer service at Prosser courthouse cut to Tuesdays only

PROSSER — Prosser is keeping the county seat at the courthouse, but a lack of money will cut court services.

Customer service hours at Benton County District Court in Prosser will be reduced to only Tuesdays starting Jan. 1.

Fear of losing court services prompted Prosser Mayor Paul Warden to write to county commissioners, concerned it might impose a financial burden on the city, already is struggling since the closure of its largest employer, Con Agra.

Commissioners have drafted a reply to Warden, advising him to talk to District Court judges, who ordered the cuts.

District and Superior court cases have been held in Prosser three days a week, with a customer service window open weekdays from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m., except for lunch hour.

That will be cut to one day for District Court, with all Superior Court matters moving to Kennewick, according to the District Court judges.

Tuesdays will be court days, and the window will be open those days, said Terry Tanner, presiding judge of the District Court.

Warden said in his letter, sent a week before commissioners approved the biennial budget Nov. 29, that eliminating court services in Prosser would cost the city "at least \$66,000 annually" just for the police department to do its duties while also attending cases that would be moved to the Tri-Cities.

Commissioners want Warden to know they had no part in the decision.

"No additional cuts were made in the baseline 2011-12 biennial district court departmental budget that was adopted by the board of commissioners," says the draft letter, which is to be considered for approval at Monday's commission meeting.

Two judges and several District Court staff made a final unsuccessful plea to commissioners last week for money to preserve court services.

On Nov. 30, the judges posted notice stating that the Prosser District Court customer service window would permanently close Dec. 31, and that beginning in January all payment and information services would be handled at District Court offices in Kennewick.

The notice did not mention that payment of fines would be allowed in Prosser on Tuesdays during court.

Jacki Lahtinen, court administrator, said the Prosser office had two employees, but one resigned last month.

Tanner said the job will go unfilled.

"Right now, we have other needs for that money," he said.

Tanner said the judges decided to consolidate Prosser court days from three to one.

"We will continue to hold (District) Court in Prosser on Tuesdays, but all (Superior Court) cases will be moved to Kennewick," he added.

Posting the closure notice was the District Court judges' decision alone, he said.

"We wanted to get the sign up as soon as possible," Tanner said.

Warden said cutting court to one day will mean Prosser police will have to make more trips to Kennewick for court business.

"We just don't know the impact yet," he said.

Read more: <http://www.tri-cityherald.com/2010/12/04/1278149/prosser-courthouses-customer-service.html#ixzz17NYwryUc>